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U.S. has obligation to stop Soviet thrust

By RAY S. CLINE

The subject of covert action in Nicaragua and neighboring states in Central America is of grave importance for those nations and indeed the whole Caribbean-Central American region.

What needs to be emphasized is that the position the United States takes on this issue now has far-reaching strategic consequences for relationships between the United States and the Soviet Union. It also will materially affect the fate of lesser totalitarian dictatorships like Cuba and many small nations struggling to keep free and independent of Communist internal rule or Soviet hegemony. It is an exceptional situation confronting this country and Congress has a heavy responsibility to deal with it wisely.

Covert action by the intelligence agencies of the U.S. government should be an exceptional act. But it is entirely legitimate when it is authorized by the president to carry out essential U.S. national security programs abroad when overt means are inappropriate or insufficient to counter a serious threat to American interests. Such a threat exists in Central America today. The crucial conflict zone is Nicaragua, where a dictatorship supported directly by the Soviet Union and Cuba is trying to suppress liberty inside Nicaragua and export violence and instability across its borders.

It is within the constitutional prerogatives of the president as commander-in-chief of the armed forces and chief executive to authorize covert special activities by intelligence agencies to support national foreign policy objectives abroad — in ways that conceal and do not acknowledge publicly the role of the U.S. government when this course is safer or more effective than open military operations.

We must turn to the key question of whether covert action is justified now. It is a much broader question. It is one the

Congress must examine with its eyes fixed on long-term challenges to the security of our nation, its moral values and political institutions.

I say yes, covert action in Central America is justified because the kind of covert action in which we are or ought to be engaged is both strategic and defensive. By this I mean it is designed to counter the forward thrust of Soviet political and military domination of important regions of the globe.

Political oppression and outright captivity are widespread in our troubled time. It is possible, though not inevitable, that this decade is one of the permanent turning points in history. The fate of Nicaragua could be one of those turning points.

It is conceivable that the Russians could, by superior forward political planning, create a worldwide trend toward totalitarian governments ruled by one-party Communist dictatorships hostile to the United States and other open societies that would end in this century in Russian domination in world affairs.

It is patently still the strategy of the leaders of the Soviet Union to increase and expand the reach of their power, neutralizing U.S. military capabilities with the threat of nuclear war implicit in the gigantic Soviet military weapons buildup of the 1970s and destroying the

political will of non-Communist countries to pay the price of local and regional self-defense.

Consequently, the United States faces a persistent hostile behavior pattern in conflicts below the level of organized, declared warfare. Make no mistake: Our form of free society and our influence abroad are the targets of the conflict in Central America above and beyond the local stakes. First Nicaragua and next El Salvador are the pawns in this Soviet-Cuban power game in Central America.

The strategic issue is whether in the end there will be the peace of the Gulag or the peace of the ballot box and the marketplace.

This is the issue at stake in Nicaragua. The United States should use every diplomatic and information device at its disposal to explain that the "war of national liberation" waged in Central America from a base in Nicaragua is simply Leninist double talk for a war

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destabilizing governments cooperative with the United States through terrorism, political revolutionary action and guerrilla warfare. Nicaragua is playing this role, supplying the arms and leadership for guerrilla war against El Salvador, where a pluralist elected government struggles for stability.

When President John F. Kennedy came into office in 1961 he noted that the Soviet doctrine of wars of national liberation being fair game meant Communist leaders could create and

support what he called brush-fire wars anywhere. The United States needs to adopt a strategy of flatly denouncing and strategically countering expansionist political "liberation" moves by Communist totalitarian states.

Unless Americans discover a remedy to the war of national liberation in Central America, the Vietnam tragedy will be repeated, not because of the involvement of U.S. forces as is often alleged, but by further spread of Soviet-Cuban model governments on America's doorstep, another massive flood of refugees from Communist areas, the placing of Mexico in the target circle for the next war of national liberation, and the disastrous loss of confidence in worldwide security guarantees from the United States that would ensue.

Such a Central American debacle has the potential of starting the avalanche of political despair and changing strategic alignments that would tilt the balance of world power toward American inferiority.

The United States can stop that tilt. The Soviet-Cuban war of national liberation in Central America absolutely must be defeated, as President Reagan insists. Nicaragua is the place to stop it, not by overt military intervention, but by covert aid to Nicaraguans fighting to give free institutions a chance in their country.

Ray S. Cline, of Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, is director of the World Strategy Network. His article is excerpted from testimony he delivered last week before the Western Hemisphere subcommittee of the House Foreign Affairs Committee.